

RUBBERNECK: AN OVERLOOKED WORD

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Often when children are exposed to a word for the first time, the instance of its use is so vivid that the word is indelibly impressed on the memory. There are many words which, though no longer used today, I still remember because of experiences associated with the words. This is true for the word "rubberneck". I remember, as a child, how I used to lift up the phone receiver, only to hear the familiar accusation of "rubberneck, rubberneck". This was a fairly common experience for me and, I am sure, for many others who inadvertently blundered into a conversation on the party line. The word has

into the etymology of the word has solved the mystery. Originally, the word referred to a gaping person: thus the rubber neck.

The word is a fine example of a metaphorical compound which someone invented to apply to the idler on the streets, often a tourist, who craned his neck to see things. Aside from the etymology, the word is lexicographically interesting because historical dictionaries have not recognized its full development from a word for a gaping person, such as a tourist, to a person who eavesdrops on the telephone. A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles (DAE), for instance, does not even list the word or any of its derivations such as "rubberneck car" (a touring car) or "to rubber" (to listen in on). One would think that Craigie and Hulbert would have eagerly included this word as an Americanism which was striking enough to attract the attention of British writers like Galsworthy and the Scottish philologist J. Y. T. Greig.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) mentions the word -- first in the abbreviated verb form, "rubber", from Hugh McHugh's John Henry in 1901 and second under "rubberneck" itself, quoting Pall Mall Magazine in 1899 and Greenough and Kittredge's Words and Their Ways in English Speech in 1902. Both entries define the word respectively as "to crane the neck in curiosity" and "a gaping fellow in the street". Obviously the word referred to visual rather than auditory activity. By 1902 there is still no reference in the OED to the word meaning to eavesdrop although the party-line concept had already been implemented in New York City in 1981. The Supplement to the OED contributes an earlier example from George Ade's Artie in 1896 along with combination forms such as "Rubberneck Auto", "rubber-neck waggon", "rubber-neck car" and "rubberneck parties". The example from

Artie refers to gawking people and the others to sight-seeing vehicles and activities for tourists. Here again there is no reference to the meaning of eavesdrop. This is, of course, understandable, considering the OED's emphasis on British, rather than American, words and the early resistance in Great Britain to the telephone which didn't permit wide use of the word.

Mitford M. Matthews' *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles* (DA), however, spends ample time on the word. Like the OED it first lists the abbreviated verb form "rubber", meaning to eavesdrop, quoting from such diverse sources as George Ade's Artie in 1896, Sinclair Lewis's Main Street in 1920, and even "Moon Mullins" in the Chicago Tribune comic section in 1950. The quotation from Main Street is the first quoted instance in this dictionary of the word referring to eavesdropping by telephone: "Say, did you here me putting one over on these goats that are always rubbering in on party-wires? I hope they heard me." The dictionary had caught up with the party line long after the language had.

The DH also quotes instances of the word meaning a gaping person and of combination forms, but his recognition of "rubber" as an abbreviated form of rubberneck applied to telephone eavesdropping is a significant advance in the lexicography of the word. He fails, however, to list the noun "rubberneck" or "rubbernecker" as a person who listens in on the telephone, a meaning prevalent among party liners, especially parties of four, across the country.

That the OED occasionally fails to keep up with changes in meaning is understandable. No dictionary, no matter how earnest and comprehensive its descriptive approach, will keep up with every change. Then, too, the OED's emphasis is on British words. But it is strange that the DAE omitted the word entirely. Certainly it was a common Americanism as early as 1896 (Artie uses it at least three times) and should have been picked up by this dictionary. In 1876 Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, and the party line, which grew out of this invention in 1891 and caused the word to be adapted, should have been described in the DAE.

Even the comprehensive H. L. Mencken, that great collector and cataloguer of American words, failed to mention the new meaning of this word. In The American Language, he discussed the word as meaning a gaping person, its unattested etymology (German Gummi-hals), the fact that the British had picked it up already by 1902, and various combination forms such as "rubberneck wagon", "rubberneck car" and "rubberneck bus". But nowhere did he mention "rubberneck" or "to rubber" in connection with the telephone. Either he did not consider the meaning important or else he was unaware of it. Mencken also pointed out that J. Y. T. Greig called this word "one of the best words ever coined". When its adaptability to the changing American scene is considered, Greig's statement is no exaggeration.

As telephone systems become more sophisticated and party lines

are replaced with the efficient, private lines of the twentieth century, the word "rubberneck" begins to vanish from the language like thousands of other words which were used to serve a purpose in the culture of the day and then gradually fell by the wayside to be later studied by scholars. My children will never hear the word used or use it in its telephonic sense.

THE SILENT ALPHABET REVISITED

In the August 1970 *Kickshaws*, Dave Silverman reproduced a list of 26 words from Dmitri Borgmann's book *Beyond Language* (Scribner's, 1967), in which each letter of the alphabet in turn is silent. This bit of logological wordplay is continually rediscovered; Richard Lederer recently gave a similar list in his article "Orthographe Mirabile" in the Summer 1980 issue of *Verbatim*. Undoubtedly the hardest five letters to silence are F, J, Q, R and V; we repeat the Borgmann and Lederer solutions below.

F	neufchatel	halfpenny
J	marijuana	rijsttafel
Q	cinq-cents	Colquhoun
R	atelier	forecastle, Worcester
V	fivepence	

According to William Watt, our words are haunted by "the little ghosts of silent letters." Indeed it has been estimated that two-thirds of our lexicon is populated with these silent specters, leading Thorstein Veblen to proclaim "English orthography satisfies all the requirements of the canons of reputability under the law of conspicuous waste."